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SUBJECT: INDIA LOOKS TO REVIVE SILK ROAD HERITAGE, NOT GREAT GAME

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This message is sensitive but unclassified, handle accordingly.

¶1. (SBU) In an April 26 meeting with U.S. DCM, Indian Deputy Chief of Mission Govinda Khampa took great pains to explain India's priorities in Tajikistan. Far from extending India's "strategic reach," the repair of the Ayni Airfield outside of Dushanbe is part of India's Technical Economic Cooperation Program. When completed, the airfield will be Tajikistan's to use as it sees fit. India had contracted with a local firm to repair the airfield, which had been out of service since the 1980s, but the contractor "completely failed" to complete the contract. India then brought in 50-60 semi-skilled laborers from the Border Roads Organization (BRO), an Indian civilian government agency, to complete the repairs.

NO MIGS, NO AVIATION TRAINING

¶2. (SBU) When asked about a Russian headline in "Nezavisimaya Gazeta," "Delhi Pushing Moscow Out," Khampa claimed "No, no, no, Moscow has nothing to do with it." Despite several media reports claiming that India will station up to two squadrons of MiG-29s, establish a long-term presence, and provide military training for Tajiks once the airfield is complete, Khampa alternated between, "Those reports are speculation," and "We have no information on that." He said India does not intend to

"own" the airbase, and India's assistance is not part of a new "geopolitical move." There is no firm date for completion of the project. India would not answer individual questions on press reports about Ayni, Khampa said, because that would "get messy." Tajik Ministry of Foreign Affairs officials have also refused to comment publicly. Foreign Ministry Spokesman Sattarov said he could neither confirm nor deny the reports, and he advised caution in handling the story. Whatever India's motivation, it is clearly not an issue that the Indian Embassy wants in the press.

INDIA IS NOT BANKING ON TAJIK POWER, EITHER

13. (SBU) Khampa also downplayed India's expectations for hydropower from Tajikistan in the short term. He said there are no Indian energy investments, no government-to-government agreements, and Indian business overall with Tajikistan is "negligible." He questioned Tajikistan's ability to export energy, given the wintertime energy shortages, even in the capital. There were once weekly flights to Delhi from Dushanbe, that Khampa hopes will be revived, but there are no immediate plans for them.

BUT, CULTURAL TIES ARE BOOMING

14. (SBU) India's real investment in Tajikistan is cultural and educational. Khampa recalled the close cultural ties that date back to the ancient Silk Road trading links. He said in Northern India one can still find ancient Tajik (Samarkand and Bukhara) rugs and many Hindi words are Persian (Tajiki) in origin. The Monguls ruled Northern India and Tajikistan for hundreds of years. Khampa's own ethnic heritage is Mongolian. The Indian Embassy's Cultural Center is one of the most active in Dushanbe. April 26, for example, the Embassy hosts a display of Tajik art. Hindi dance classes are free, and 250 Tajiks are learning Hindi, because, according to Khampa, Tajik youth are

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"crazy" about Bollywood movies.

15. (SBU) India sends 50 Tajiks a year, cost-free, to various Indian cities to learn skills like information technology, entrepreneurship, accounting, fingerprinting, and English. Several Tajik diplomats have been to India for diplomatic tradecraft courses, and India has a few masters- degree scholarships for Tajiks.

16. (SBU) COMMENT: Aside from some shuttle and suitcase traders, India has very few economic links with Tajikistan. India does not send observers to Tajik elections, has no border security or counternarcotics programs, and does not provide humanitarian assistance. Given the few avenues into Tajiki political and economic life, the speculation that India is making a major strategic move in Central Asia through refurbishment of the Ayni airfield may be a stretch. At least from the political side, the Indian Embassy maintains that India has no hidden agenda in Tajikistan. However, the Indian Prime Minister is visiting neighboring Uzbekistan, and the Indians certainly have the goodwill and cultural and educational ties to build a more dynamic relationship with Tajikistan and the rest of the former Silk Road world. It will take more time to learn India's real intentions for Ayni. We would welcome any insight and information from New Delhi.

17. (SBU) COMMENT CONTINUED: We have been somewhat bemused by the Russian press reaction to the assertion that India will station MiG-29s at Ayni. While "Nezavisimaya Gazeta" bleats "Delhi Pushing Moscow Out," other pundits are salivating at the growth of the old Primakov idea of a Russia-China-India axis to stand up to the United States in Asia. END COMMENT.  
HOAGLAND